



My Years as Prime Minister (Ron Graham Books)

By Jean Chretien

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My Years as Prime Minister is Jean Chrétien's own story, told with insight and humour, of his ten years at 24 Sussex Drive as Canada's twentieth prime minister.

By the time he left office, Jean Chrétien had been in politics for forty years – and his experience is evident on every page of his important, engaging memoir. Chrétien loves to tell a good tale – and he does so here in the same honest, plain-spoken style of **Straight from the Heart**, his earlier bestselling account of his years as a Cabinet minister. He gives us a self-portrait of a working prime minister – the passionate Canadian renowned for finishing every speech with *Vive le Canada!*

Chrétien knows how government works, and his political instincts are sharp. Through the decade 1993 to 2003 we watch as he wins three majority elections as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. Finding the country in a dreadful state, dangerously in debt and bitterly divided, he describes how his government wiped out the deficit in just four years, helped to defeat the separatists in the cliffhanger Quebec referendum, passed the *Clarity Act*, and set out to fulfill the economic and social promises his party made in its famous Red Books. He reveals how and why he kept the country out of the war in Iraq – a defining moment for many Canadians; led Team Canada on whirlwind trade missions around the world; and participated in a host of major international summits.

Along with his astute comments on politics and government, he gives candid portraits of a broad cast of characters. Over a beer, Tony Blair confides his hesitation about taking Britain into the Iraq War; in the corridors of the United Nations, Bill Clinton offers to speak to Quebecers on behalf of Canadian unity; while at home, Chrétien reveals the events leading up to the departure of his finance minister, Paul Martin. He recounts the dramatic night in which his quick-thinking wife, Aline, saved him from an assassination attempt at 24 Sussex Drive; and, with lively humour, he describes how he and Clinton successfully escaped from their own bodyguards – to the consternation of all.

Even in the highest office in the land, Jean Chrétien never lost his connection

with ordinary Canadians. He is as warm and funny in his recollections as in person, at once combative and cool-headed, a man full of vitality and charm. Above all, from start to finish, his love for his country and his passion to keep it united run clear and deep.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

The Rt. Hon. Jean Chrétien was first elected to Parliament in 1963, at the age of twenty-nine. Four years later he was given his first Cabinet post and, over the next thirty years, he headed nine key ministries. From 1993 to 2003 he served as Canada's twentieth prime minister.

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Entre Nous

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Not long ago, in April 2007, I was in Moscow to attend the funeral of Boris Yeltsin, the former president of Russia and a person whom I greatly admired. He was a good man who spoke the truth, and his convictions changed the course of history, not only in his own country but around the world. The ceremony, full of dignity and beauty, took place in the cathedral that had been rebuilt to mark the return of freedom of religion in what had been the Soviet Union. Even a heathen would have bowed before the priests dressed in their majestic robes, and everyone present was moved to hear the old hymns of Mother Russia that so pierce the soul.

Looking around, I saw many former world leaders, now plain citizens, come to bid farewell to the one-time enemy who had later become their brother in arms. There was the elder George Bush, whose son I had gotten to know so well, and at his side foreign kings and presidents who seemed, in this holy place, mere mortals, as were we all. I said hello to John Major, the ex-prime minister of Great Britain, and we were joined by another famous retiree, though younger than either of us, Bill Clinton. When Bill and I shook hands on the steps of the church, I felt as though we were two parishioners meeting after Mass on a Sunday morning back home. With us was Lech Walesa, the former president of Poland, who had captured the imagination of the world when he was nothing but a courageous electrician from Gdańsk daring to defy the might of the Soviet Union. We talked of the good old days and of the present, which didn't seem so bad either, and swapping stories about our friend Boris reminded us of our own impermanence. The friendships and the memories warmed us in the cold spring air of Moscow, just as they continue to warm me in my advancing years. They are what propelled me to write this book, not to puff up my reputation but to record a moment in the all too brief span of time we human beings are given on earth.

Whether foreign or domestic, I've always had a passion for politics. The other day I heard a young man say on television that he was standing for election because he wanted to serve. I said to myself, "My friend, you seem nice, you have some charm, but you're not telling the whole truth. Going into politics is both simpler and more complicated than that." To be frank, politics is about wanting power, getting it, exercising it, and keeping it. Helping people comes with it naturally, because you'll never be elected if you treat people badly. But no one will ever convince me, with all the experience I've had, that the motivations are strictly altruistic. No – we throw ourselves into politics because we love it.

Politics is a sport in which the desire for victory is everything, because the ultimate reward is the power that lets you do some good for your constituents as a member of Parliament, for the stakeholders as a minister, and for the entire country and maybe even the rest of the world as prime minister. The more you succeed and the higher you climb, the more the wish to win becomes an obsession that consumes you day and night – but also gives you satisfactions too numerous to count, from helping the unemployed in your riding find a job to

sending Canadian peacekeepers to the rescue of besieged Bosnians. It's in that sense, I suppose, that you can say that you're in the game to serve, since politics gives you the opportunity to help others.

I was fortunate to have been given that opportunity. The joy of serving, to pick up on the young man's idea, allows you to forget all the miseries that come too – when you freeze your feet campaigning from door to door; when the doors slam in your face; when the hand you extend is refused; when the neighbour you've known all your life pretends not to see you across the street; when old friends betray you or laugh at you when you meet or, worse, behind your back. A dirty business, you say to yourself in those moments. I've known many of their kind, but I've also known how quickly the next victory erases them from memory.

This book picks up the political story of Canada, as I lived and breathed it, from where the updated edition of my earlier memoir, *Straight from the Heart*, left off, following my return to politics in January 1990 after a four-year absence, my election as leader of the Liberal Party the next June, and my time as leader of the Opposition until the autumn of 1993.

It is hard for most Canadians to remember how bleak our days looked at that point in our history. To be frank, Canada was in terrible shape – exhausted, demoralized, and fractured. The federal, provincial, and municipal governments were virtually bankrupt, and their combined debt was greater than the country's total GDP, its gross domestic product. Unemployment was stuck at 11.4 per cent. Our interest rates seemed permanently fixed higher than U.S. rates, despite our lower inflation rate, and many of our best scientists, researchers, and scholars were leaving for greener pastures. Though none of that was solely the fault of nine years of Progressive Conservative rule, Ottawa had to bear the blame for creating a “made in Canada” recession – one of the worst since the 1930s – through its ideological monetary policy and its failure to help Canadian industry adapt to the new realities of free trade, financial globalization, and rapidly changing technology.

Moreover, because Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had defeated the Liberals in 1984 by promising to restore prosperity, reduce the debt and deficit, and create “jobs, jobs, jobs,” his government's record of broken promises, coupled with a string of corruption charges, ministerial resignations, and patronage appointments, produced a feeling of cynicism and betrayal that plunged public respect for Canada's politicians and democratic institutions to a historic low.

Even so, in my opinion, Mulroney might have survived to fight and win a third term if he hadn't also put the country in a constitutional pressure cooker, as though reopening the Constitution Act of 1982 was somehow going to solve the real problems we were facing as a people. He and I used to joke with each other in the House of Commons about the great fight it would be, him against me, and he had a twinkle in his eye whenever he spoke about winning the triple crown of a third majority. Instead, by using exaggerated rhetoric and divisive tactics to try to sell two successive constitutional packages to Canadians – and then failing to deliver either one – he reignited separatist sentiments in Quebec and rekindled a sense of alienation in Western Canada. As a result, his close friend and key lieutenant Lucien Bouchard quit the Tories and launched the Bloc Québécois, which was dedicated to advancing the cause of Quebec independence within the federal House; Preston Manning funnelled Western discontent into his populist movement, the Reform Party; and Mulroney himself, with his personal popularity level lower than the percentage of people who believed that Elvis Presley was still alive, decided to retreat from the field in February 1993.

Ten years later, at my retirement from public life on December 12, 2003, Canada was enjoying the longest period of economic expansion since the 1960s, Ottawa was on the verge of announcing its seventh surplus budget in a row, unemployment had fallen to around 7 per cent and was still dropping, the Parti Québécois had been defeated in Quebec, Western Canada had never been more prosperous, Canada's international

reputation as an economic miracle and independent force for peace in the world had never been higher, and the Liberal Party of Canada was guaranteed by every poll and pundit to be ready to win its fourth consecutive majority. So how did this remarkable turnaround happen? What critical decisions or mistakes did we make along the way? Why did we choose one solution rather than another?

My intention is not to produce a weighty, comprehensive account of the “Chrétien years.” I’ll leave that task to scholars and historians. Instead, I want to write an informative and highly personal recollection of my decade as prime minister – to tell it as I saw it, to share a few entertaining stories as I do with my friends, to correct the record where necessary, to brag a bit, and to be as candid as possible. That said, I hope readers will understand and forgive me if I refrain from going into my family’s private matters or commenting unnecessarily on the foibles and failures of individual personalities. No human being is perfect, and there are always more than enough people ready and eager to remind politicians of that fact every day of the week. I couldn’t bring myself to write a wartsandall description of the members of my staff and Cabinet or even of my political opponents. If that proves a weakness in the book, so be it, but it’s a strength in life – and especially in politics – to learn to take people as they are and accept what they are not.

Another caveat: I have also limited myself to writing about events that occurred during my period in office. Except in a few places where I felt it necessary to mention what happened after December 2003 (and even there without much comment or detailed analysis), I don’t believe that these memoirs are the proper forum in which to air my thoughts about subsequent political issues. In earlier drafts, however, I was prepared to jump ahead in time and write at some length about my successor’s decision to launch the Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program under Mr. Justice John Gomery, partly because I understood the public’s curiosity about my views, but mostly because I wanted to make use of the opportunity to express my grave concerns about the commission, its findings, and its ramifications. Unfortunately, by the time the...

Users Review

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